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Saturday, March 22, 2003

China's \$2.4M tobacco purchase encouraging to Kentucky farmers

By Bruce Schreiner
 The Associated Press

LOUISVILLE - China's purchase of \$2.4 million worth of Kentucky tobacco could be the start of a fruitful relationship for the beleaguered burley sector, an industry leader said Friday.

The deal, though small in volume, represents the first sale of Kentucky tobacco in more than a decade to the world's largest cigarette-consuming nation. Kentucky is the nation's leading burley producer.

In all, 654,000 pounds of surplus leaf from the 2002 crop was bought this week by the China National Tobacco Import Export Group Corp. The burley is already processed and ready to be blended into cigarettes made by China's state-run manufacturer.

Danny McKinney, CEO of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association in Lexington, said he was optimistic the deal was the first of many sales.

The sale is timely given a convergence of bad trends for tobacco producers - smoking declines in the United States, lower leaf exports and a rise in imported tobacco used by U.S. manufacturers.

"All of a sudden, the tide has gone the other way," McKinney said. "We found a new market. We know that the market in the states is not going to grow."

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